DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 194 853 CG 014 794

AUTHOR Liss, Marsha B.
TITLE Adolescence: In Search of a Definition.
PUB DATE May 80
NOTE 9p.: Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Western Psychological Association (60th, Honolulu, HI, May 5-9, 1980).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adolescent Development: *Adolescents: *Age Differences: Attitudes: *Developmental Stages: *Developmental Tasks: Elementary Secondary Education: Grade 6: Grade 9: Grade 12: Physical Development: *Sex Differences: *Time Perspective

ABSTRACT

A questionnaire attempting to define adolescence from the adolescent's view was administered to 300 students, 50 males and 50 females in each of 3 grades (grades 6, 9, and 12). The questionnaire examined (1) ages perceived as dividing points between adolescence, childhood and adulthood: (2) tasks seen as most important in advancing from one period to the next: and (3) significance of legal, formal rites. Results indicated more consistency across sex than across age groups. The most significant tasks of adulthood were seen as responsibility items for the 12th graders, partying behaviors for the 9th graders: no consistent pattern emerged for 6th graders. Twelfth graders referred to biological changes as hallmarks of adolescence, ninth graders referred to a combination of biological and social tasks, and sixth graders mentioned quitting school and driving. Data suggest that adolescence is not a constant concept during the teen years but appears a function of age. (Author/NRB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED194853

Adolescence: In Search of a Definition

Marsha B. Liss

California State College, San Bernardino

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Marsha B. Liss

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CG 014794

Paper presented at meeting of the Western Psychological Association, Honolulu, Hawaii, May 1980.

Adolescence....in search of a definition*

Marsha B. Liss

California State College, San Bernardino

One of the hardest lectures for me to give in Developmental Psychology has always been that of discussing adolescence. I'm perplexed about saying when or what it is. Dictionary definitions might be a way of answering the question. Typical entries under 'adolescence' refer to the period between childhood and maturity; starts at puberty and ends with adulthood. These, though are actually quite vague and basically circular. For instance, what is an adult? What is maturity? Historical review doesn't help either since adolescence is really a 20th century Western invention.

Oftentimes my students and I find it useful to compare the rites of passage in this country with those of other, often called more primitive, cultures. In the latter it is assumed that the rite of passage is a prescribed act and creates a dichotomy between childhood and adulthood without the intervening period of adolescence. However, in Western culture, life is not as simple -- through time we have evolved very complex systems of growing up and determining one's "developmental stage". The strategy of defining adolescence according to the rites of passage in the United States seems at first glance to be a viable one - but upon closer examination the students and I become increasingly frustrated. Most of the laws governing rites of passage in the legal sense differ from type to type creating a schizoid pattern of growing up in society's legal norms. For instance, in California which incidentally is a state where most legal ages are consistent, the picture may seem to say that you are an adult at 18 - you can vote, quit school, get married, but...you have already been driving a car and it will be a while before you can have a drink.

*Paper presented at meetings of the Western Psychological Association, Honolulu, Hawaii, May 1980.

Additionally I'm sure you will agree that most teenagers hardly think of voting as the determination or goal of being grownup - especially when the majority of their elders do not engage in the behavior terribly often. We then hypothesize that perhaps informal rites of passage can define adolescence and be deemed important to people of this age group. Informal rites of driving a car versus the age when you can have a license...being allowed to buy alcoholic beverages may not compare to taking a first drink or getting drunk. But still I'm nagged with the question of what really is an adolescent - formal or informal definition and if informal, which rites are supreme? The following are some of the answers, at least according to the teenagers themselves.

My sample consisted of 300 male and female teens and pre-teens. Fifty boys and 50 girls at each of three grade levels grade 6 (pre-adolescents); grade 9 (middle period) and grade 12 (almost adult) were the subjects. They came from a predominantly white lower to lower middle class community. The students were presented with a questionnaire which they filled out in their classrooms without any talking between them allowed and snickering strongly discouraged and with the teachers absent to insure to the students that their work was confidential, anonymous, with no one looking over their shoulder and therefore I hoped that they would be more honest with their views.

The questionnaire was based on data from pilot subjects. The subjects in the pilot were asked open-ended questions concerning their definitions of adolescence. The pilot subjects had no further instructions. From the answers I was able to form a word list consisting of different adolescent and adult-oriented formal (legal) and informal (cultural) rites and activities. The words fell into four large categories: the physical (such as voice changes, menstruation, breast development); the social (such as staying out late, having your first date, having first sexual experiences); the responsibility-taking

mode (full-time jobs, babysitting, having a home); and lastly the legal referents (such as voting, buying alcohol, jury duty). The final questionnaire and word list integrated the concepts of adolescence mentioned by the pilot subjects.

The first questions dealt with defining the time period of adolescence. In particular I asked the students when they thought a person was no longer a child, and then when a person becomes an adult - the difference between these would define the time span. Next the subjects were given the word list which they used to select answers to the remaining questions. The students were asked to note those items from the word list which a person is allowed to do as a grownup that s/he wasn't allowed to do before; which things a person can do as an adolescent which s/he couldn't do as a child. They were told that things allowed to do also included things that happen to you naturally. Then the students were asked which they were: child, adolescent, adult, and to list the items which characterize their stage. On a separate page I also listed 13 items which are legal rites of age passage and asked the subjects to rank order the 13 items by importance to them. The 13 legal items were: driver's license, buying alcohol, buying a gun, quitting school, getting a full-time job, curfew, getting married without parent's consent, reaching the age of consent, going to jail, serving on a jury, voting, enlisting in the military, buying cigarettes.

Obviously there is a lot of data. First, the ninth and twelfth graders both reported that they had just ceased being children - according to the ninth graders childhood ends at 14 and according to the 12th graders it ends at 16, with few or no sex differences. The 6th graders made no such claims - they said childhood ends at 13 - an age which none of them had as yet attained. This makes sense in that a later question showed that the sixth graders thought they were still children. The ninth graders overwhelmingly (92%) felt they

were adolescents where the twelfth graders were evenly divided between adulthood and adolescence. There was more agreement on the beginning of adulthood--males gave slightly higher answers than females but almost all three grades said 18 years old and you are a grownup. The next conclusion is that the older you get the shorter the period of adolescence--it ranges from five to six years in sixth grade to four years in ninth grade and to a scant two years in the 12th grade.

Glancing just briefly over the next three questions it appears that as the children approached adulthood the items which are significant change. In the early years they are excited by the prospects of undergoing physical development--puberty. Later in the ninth grade they are involved in issues of social importance--dating, smoking, drinking, driving--choosing all the informal rather than formal aspects of these types of behaviors. Then in the 12th grade aspects of adult responsibility finally surface--there are increased references to owning a home, getting a fulltime job and being independent--at least an encouraging outlook on the part of the next generation.

What about the views of legal guidelines? The younger children are still looking forward to thrill-seeking moments and view reaching the age of consent, quitting school and getting a driver's license of first order importance. In the ninth grade the answers are generally similar although getting married and curfew have risen in status along with buying guns and drinks. Incidentally smoking did not appear very high on any lists--one might think that young people today are heeding some of the cautions against smoking even though the statistics prove otherwise. More likely, though, since smoking now takes place in elementary and junior high schools, illegally of course, it can no longer be connected with reaching adulthood but belongs to late childhood. Lastly, the 12th graders are interested in enlisting in the military, having a full time job and buying a gun. The 12th graders who should be able to do most of these activities

shortly do not place voting and serving on a jury high on the lists while going to jail often ranked at the bottom. We should note that while they put jail at the bottom they place buying a gun very high and in California there is a law which in the last two years has been widely publicized called, "Use a gun, go to jail," but this apparantly has not made an impression on the young people. Perhaps buying a gun, which I almost didn't include on the list, is a vestige of the spirit of the old west come alive. Likewise the presence of three air force bases within 45 minutes of the area might account for the placement of military enlistment high in their rankings.

The first overall statement is that adolescence is not a constant concept during the teen years and is a function of age. The perspective and efinitio of this term differs somewhat for boys and girls (such as girls thinking adulthood starts earlier than boys do)--and of course it is interesting to remember that many legal laws have lower age ranges for girls than boys (due to the myth of early social maturity by females) although in states like California many laws are being changed to equivalent male and female versions.

The period of adolescence is a fairly new invention--a construct of the 20th century when compulsory education, labor laws and the economic system fostered its development. Today with ever-changing values and social role taking and vocational choices in all phases of life, adolescents may have even fewer rigid cues with which to demarcate developmental periods. According to the current data, the cues change with ages making me wonder if the period of adolescence is a dream, cliche or reality. Maybe grownups have trouble dealing with adolescence since there may be no such thing--we try to create a period out of uncertainty and change and convince ourselves that teenagers are all unpredictable when in fact no such period exists. I look at the data and conclude that during the teenage years many changes occur and at different

points the varying rites and social engagements carry weight yet at other times they are meaningless. Even adolescents have inconsistent views of adolescence--so no wonder I have been puzzled. While I still have several more angles to pursue in the reams of data collected for this study, evidence indicating which societal agents promote which rites of passage may remain untapped. Further investigation into this critical age definition dilemma could pinpoint how the changes develop and which factors (such as decision makers of peers, power figures such as parents and the law enforcement groups) determine the changes. Or is there some natural progression forming this mysterious and chaotic period?

There is one other angle for which I think the present data may serve as a basis for comparison. In California many of the legal rites of passage are currently the same age (18) with few sex differences. However, that is not the case in other states. There are states where, for instance, a girl can marry at 14, see an X-rated movie on her second anniversary, drive away from the justice of the peace at 18 and celebrate her seventh wedding anniversary with her first drink. It does seem a little ridiculous doesn't it? I wonder how these differences affect the growing child? I imagine that they create great confusion. In states where the discrepancies in age-related legal/formal rites of passage are increased I would expect variant patterns of definitions and importance. Likewise what does it mean psychologically to say that children in one part of the country are old enough to drive while those elsewhere can only marry! And yes, when/or if, the draft returns will voting become a more crucial issue to young people? According to the strange permutations of the cross-country legal laws, moving from one state to another will transform parts of you into a grownup while the move will demote you to being a kid in some other aspects! If I was confused before investigating these questions

I certainly am now--I'm not sure what to do about presenting my lecture on adolescence and in fact last week it came out more confusing and in need of a definition as it had in the past. There is clearly a need for studying these rites of passage more closely and taking cross-nation samples (perhaps adding rural and urban differences as well) and then assessing the utility of different age constructs and perhaps drafting legal age definitions which would be less confusing and more constructive, thereby unveiling some of the mysteries and possible causes for instability and restlessness of the neither fish nor foul, neither adult nor child people in our midst.